

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15
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FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
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SUBJECT: ASHFIELD AND GRIMSBY BV-ELECTIONS

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SUMMARY. A VISIT TO THE ASHFIELD AND GRIMSBY CONSTITU-
ENCIES REVEALS STRIKINGLY DIFFERENT LEVELS OF LOCAL
INTEREST IN THE BY-ELECTIONS SCHEDULED FOR APRIL 28.
THE ELECTORATE IN ASHFIELD APPEARS VERY PASSIVE, WHILE
THAT IN GRIMSBY SEEMS UNUSUALLY ACTIVE. AT THIS POINT
THE LABOR PARTY APPEARS VIRTUALLY CERTAIN TO HOLD
ASHFIELD, BUT WILL PROBABLY LOSE TONY CROSLAND'S OLD
GRIMSBY SEAT, DESPITE HAVING AN UNUSUALLY POPULAR AND
ATTRACTIVE CANDIDATE. IF, HOWEVER, THE LIBERAL CANDI-
DATE IN GRIMSBY IS ABLE TO HOLD THE 20 PERCENT HE
POLLED IN OCTOBER 1974 AND THE WEATHER IS GOOD, LABOR
WOULD HAVE A CHANCE TO UOSET THE NATIONAL SWING AND
HOLD THE SEAT. IN ANY EVENT, THE OUTCOME IS UNLIKELY
TO AFFECT THE GOVERNMENT/LIBERAL CONSULTATIVE AR-
RANGEMENT. END SUMMARY.

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1. THE VISITOR TO THE ASHFIELD CONSTITUENCY VACATED BY
LABOR MP DAVID MARQUAND AND THE GRIMSBY SEAT VACATED BY
THE DEATH OF FORMER FOREIGN SECRETARY TONY CROSLAND
CANNOT HELP BUT BE STRUCK BY THE MARKED DIFFERENCES
IN LOCAL INTEREST IN THE APRIL 28 BY-ELECTIONS. ASH-
FIELD, IN THE ROLLING NOTTINGHAMSHIRE HILLS AND COMPOSED

LARGELY OF COAL MINING TOWNS, SHOWS FEW OUTWARD SIGNS OF POLITICAL ACTIVITY OR INTEREST, EVEN THOUGH IT TRADITIONALLY HAS A VERY HIGH VOTER TURNOUT (ABOUT 80 PERCENT IN THE 1974 ELECTIONS) AND SENDS LABOR MPS TO WESTMINSTER ALMOST BY INSTINCT AND WITH OVERWHELMING MAJORITIES (MARQUAND POLLED OVER 63 PERCENT IN OCTOBER 1974, WITH THE BALANCE DIVIDED BETWEEN THE CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL CANDIDATES). NO ONE WITH WHOM WE SPOKE SERIOUSLY BELIEVED CONSERVATIVE CANDIDATE TIM SMITH HAS A CHANCE TO UPSET COUNTY COUNCILLOR MICHAEL COWAN, THE LABOR CANDIDATE. THE ONLY QUESTION SEEMS TO BE THE SIZE OF COWAN'S MAJORITY, WHICH IS EXPECTED TO BE FAR LESS THAN THAT OF MARQUAND. THE LOW-KEY CAMPAIGN SEEMS TO REFLECT THE PREDICTABILITY OF THE OUTCOME -- REPORTERS FROM LONDON PAPERS ASSIGNED TO COVER THE ASHFIELD CAMPAIGN BEMOAN THEIR FATE, OPENLY ENVY THE GOOD FORTUNE OF THEIR COLLEAGUES ASSIGNED TO COVER GRIMSBY AND SPEND MOST OF THEIR TIME IN PUBS. PUBLIC APATHY IS MANIFEST IN COUNTLESS WAYS, BUT PERHAPS MOST SIGNIFICANTLY IN THE SMALL CROWDS DRAWN BY SUCH NATIONAL FIGURES AS MICHAEL FOOT AND MARGARET THATCHER WHEN CAMPAIGNING IN THE AREA. OF THE OTHER CANDIDATES -- A LIBERAL, SOCIALIST WORKER AND NATIONAL FRONT -- ONLY THE LATTER IS OF ANY INTEREST, AND THEN ONLY BECAUSE HIS VOTE WILL PROVIDE A MEASURE OF HOW THAT PARTY'S NEO-FASCIST APPEAL REGISTERS IN A STRONG WORKING CLASS AREA WHICH HAS NO SIGNIFICANT IMMIGRANT POPULATION.

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2. GRIMSBY, A SOMEWHAT BLEAK BUT NOT UNATTRACTIVE FISHING PORT IN NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE, CONTRASTS ATTITUUDINALLY AS WELL AS TOPOGRAPHICALLY WITH ASHFIELD. POLITICAL POSTERS, HARDLY SEEN IN ASHFIELD, ARE PROMINENTLY DISPLAYED. ATTENDANCE AT POLITICAL MEETINGS, WHICH HAS FALLEN OFF THROUGHOUT BRITAIN IN RECENT YEARS, IS SURPRISINGLY HIGH -- ONE NIGHT LAST WEEK OVER 1300 GRIMSBARIANS ATTENDED POLITICAL RALLIES OF THE THREE PRINCIPAL PARTIES -- WHILE VISITS BY MRS. THATCHER AND SHIRLEY WILLIAMS PULLED BIG, RESONANT CROWDS. AND THE MEDIA, SENSING THE ACTION, ARE OMNIPRESENT. WITH ONLY A 7.7 PERCENT SWING NEEDED TO TIP THE SEAT TO THE TORIES, GRIMSBY CONSERVATIVES ARE CONFIDENT THEIR CANDIDATE, ROBERT BLAIR, A LOCAL FISH PACKING PLANT MANAGER, WILL WIN. THE LIBERAL CANDIDATE TOO IS HOPEFUL, REPORTING THAT HIS CANVASS RESULTS SHOW THAT HE WILL INCREASE THE 20 PERCENT HE POLLED IN THE OCTOBER 1974 GENERAL ELECTION. BUT LABOR CANDIDATE AUSTIN MITCHELL, A POPULAR REGIONAL TV

PERSONALITY, AUTHOR AND FORMER UNIVERSITY LECTURER

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(POLITICAL SCIENCE) IS OPTIMISTIC. AS ARE HIS SUO-
PORTERS. THEY SINCERELY BELIEVE THEY CAN STEM THE
NATIONAL TREND FAVORING THE TORIES AND RETAIN THE SEAT.
THE KEY, AS THEY SEE IT, IS THE LIBERAL VOTE -- IF IT
HOLDS, WHICH SEEMS UNLIKELY, THEY CAN WIN THE THREE
OTHER CANDIDATES -- A SOCIALIST WORKER AND TWO
INDEPENDENTS - ARE NOT SIGNIFICANT, THOUGH THE FORMER
COULD TAKE BETWEEN A HUNDRED AND TWO HUNDRED VOTES
AWAY FROM LABOR ALL DISINTERESTED OBSERVERS WITH WHOM
WE SPOKE FELT THE TORIES WOULD WIN, IF ONLY BECAUSE OF
THE UNPOPULARITY OF THE LABOR GOVERNMENT, BUT BELIEVE
THE RACE WILL BE CLOSE AND THAT MITCHELL COULD TAKE
THE SEAT FOR LABOR IF THE WEATHER IS GOOD AND LIBERAL
VOTERS REMAIN LOYAL.

3. COMMENT: WHATEVER THE OUTCOME, IT IS UNLIKELY TO
AFFECT THE DURABILITY OF THE GOVERNMENT'S ARRANGEMENT
WITH THE LIBERALS IN THE SHORT-TERM. SEVERE EROSION
OF THE LIBERALS' SHARE OF THE OOLL IN BOTH CONSTITU-
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ENCIES, HOWEVER' WOULD INCREASE PRESSURES ON DAVID
STEEL TO REJECT RENEWAL OF THE PACT IN THE FALL. AFTER
VISITING BOTH CONSTITUENCIES, WE WOULD NOT OUARREL WITH
THE GENERALLY ACCEPTED VIEW THAT LABOR WILL PROBABLY
HOLD ASHFIELD AND LOSE GRIMSBY, ALTHOUGH THE POSSI-
BILITY OF A LABOR WIN IN GRIMSBY CANNOT BE ENTIRELY
DISCOUNTED.

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